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Twenty-nine years later, another Malaysian PM at the ILO Conference

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - After an absence of 29 years, a Malaysian Prime Minister will be the guest-of-honour at the International Labour Conference in Geneva tomorrow, an event bringing together governments, employers and workers of 175 member states in annual dialogue.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will address the conference, which is expected to draw some 3,000 delegates including Labour Ministers and leaders of workers and employers' organisations from the member states of the International Labour Organisation.

The last Malaysian leader to address an International Labour Conference was Tun Abdul Razak in 1973.

The other distinguished guest for the 90th edition of the conference will be Barbados Prime Minister Owen S. Arthur who will address the conference on Thursday.

Malaysian Trades Union Congress president Senator Zainal Rampak said in Geneva today that ILO director-general Juan Somavia had invited Dr Mahathir to be the guest-of-honour during a courtesy call on the Prime Minister in Putrajaya last year.

"Trade unionists the world over are waiting to hear Dr Mahathir tomorrow," Zainal said.

"They know the policies he introduced during the Asian economic crisis and how he helped steer Malaysia out of the mess without workers being made to suffer, unlike some other countries."

Last Monday, Zainal was elected a vice-president of this year's conference. The other vice-presidents are Austria's Max Arbesser-Rastburg and Pakistan's Farhad Hussain.

Set up in 1919, the ILO formulates international labour standards in the form of conventions and recommendations, sets minimum standards of basic labour rights, upholds freedom of association, the right to organise, collective bargaining, abolition of forced labour, equality of opportunity and treatment, and other standards regulating conditions across the entire spectrum of work-related issues.

Zainal said delegates to this year's conference were likely to discuss a wide range of issues from decent work in the informal economy to the situation of workers in the occupied Arab territories.

Other issues on the agenda include the abolition of child labour, the adoption of a proposed protocol to the occupational safety and health convention, and the adoption of a possible recommendation on the promotion of co-operatives.

Zainal described this year's conference as "important", with Malaysia, for the first time, sending 40 representatives.

"Some of them are paying from their own pockets to get to the Conference just to hear the Prime Minister speak," he said.

The move to get Dr Mahathir to speak at the conference began more than a year ago, he said.

"When I tabled the proposal to the workers' groups at the ILO to have Dr Mahathir speak here, all the representatives gave their immediate approval.

"Even the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) gave its endorsement," he said.

Zainal said foreign unionists had also expressed their approval of Dr Mahathir's views on globalisation and workers' rights.

He said he received a call from a Japanese trade unionist who supported Dr Mahathir's view that globalisation should not harm the livelihood of millions of workers.

Dr Mahathir had said this at the launch of the inaugural Union Network International-Asia Pacific Regional Conference held here earlier this month.

"My foreign trade union friends also expressed their support for Dr Mahathir's views at the Apec meeting in Shanghai last October that government leaders, corporate players and unions have a shared and equal responsibility to tackle globalisation."

Zainal said ICFTU general-secretary Lord Bill Jordan had also written to Dr Mahathir congratulating him on the steps taken by Malaysia during the regional economic crisis, including the imposition of selective capital controls on Sept 2, 1998.

Asked what Dr Mahathir was likely to touch on in his address, Zainal said it would probably include income disparity and social problems that could be brought about by globalisation.

He expressed the hope that Dr Mahathir would also mention workers' rights and minimum wages.

The conference ends on June 20.

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